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ELECTRONIC NEWS GATHERING: IMPACT, IMPLICATIONS AND CHALLENGES IN TELEVISION NEWS REPORTING

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INTRODUCTION

Television news reporting demands that the reporter uses all of his or her abilities in the gathering of the news facts and story backgrounds, organizing same in a coherent fashion and then telling the viewers these stories in a clear and logical manner that they would understand. The aim of the broadcast station is to tell its viewers what is happening in a manner that is as complete as possible. The importance of television is emphasized by Skormand and Schroeder (1992) when they wrote that television is the most powerful form of public communication, as well as the prime site of the social negotiation of ideas, values and lifestyles. Time restrictions may not permit reportorial completeness in answering the 5Ws and H, but stations aim at getting the best available version of the facts at the moment of coverage.

Television news basically deals with the pictures and words of the newsmakers and of the places of the events. Electronic News Gathering (ENG) helps television news reporting in allowing the reporter to tape the sound and pictures of a story and even transmit live from the location of that story. ENG technology has given broadcasters of today flexibility older veterans only dreamt about. Because of extraordinary satellite capabilities, a reporter can file stories for the NTA NEWS at Nine from virtually any location and at a short notice. The anchor person can also anchor the same news from any location of choice. Today, Nigeria Television Authority (NTA) links up her news anchors in the different zonal stations during the News at Nine. The African Independent Television (AIT) has also excelled in doing something similar. In addition, it links up with its foreign correspondents in the other continents. During the recently concluded American presidential elections, the station was able to get live reports from its correspondents in Washington. CNN shows the world what is happening in Iraq and in the other parts of the world because of the news gathering technology it has greatly invested in.

Hyde (1987:493) defines ENG as news reports for television whether they are live or taped, produced in the field

using portable equipment employed in electronic field production. This portable equipment is a miniaturized camcorder that can be hoisted on the shoulder or any type of videotape producing equipment that uses a minicam or a portable recorder recording events on location.

WHAT IS ELECTRONIC NEWS GATHERING (EN G)

ENG is reporting with picture recording machines. Pictures are recorded electronically on the videotape. According to Grob and Herndon (1999:9) ENG started when the video cassette recorder was improved upon to meet broadcast quality. The basic tools are a portable camcorder (television camera and video camera recorder built as a single unit). The camera is compact and operates from a storage battery pack. Most television broadcasting stations use 3/4 or ½ inch videotape cassettes to record their remotes. The remotes are the video recordings of people and events done outside the studio. From these locations, stories can be sent back live to the newsroom. The camera signals are simply transmitted back to the station and put directly on air - usually by microwave or satellite transmission. This is the basic difference between it and Outside Broadcasting (OB). The OB van may have facilities to record and air events at locations. But it has no satellite connections. Usually signals are relayed back to the station for onward transmission. This may however be at the same time.

The ENG transmitting equipment beams the signal to a microwave relay station for further transmission to the station. Where there is no line of sight to a relay station, the signals can be sent to the station by satellite. Geosynchronous communication satellites do not allow any breaks in transmission because the satellites are always in view. Some digital systems use a personal computer and a modem to send video signals back to the studio. Bishop (1995 :231) notes that the developments of electronics have made possible the world wide boom in television communication: enabling information to be sent instantly to all parts of the world. Where the transmission is live, it means that the action is being recorded and transmitted simultaneously as it is happening right away. There is usually no editing. Therefore the viewer at home sees the news events as they are happening.

The use of ENG has made television news reporting more lively, faster, and flexible. Broadcasting stations increasingly use ENG to bring on the spot reports of events happening in far and near locations to their viewers. Agba (200 I: I) observes that news develop around the clock and sometimes unexpectedly. Therefore, trying to cope with the ceaseless flow and the constant pressure to keep it fresh requires speed in reporting, processing and delivery. ENG is the basic method of gathering and editing pictures and words and putting these on air. Burton (2000:266) states that recent technological changes have improved television reach and quality. The new light weight 16mm film cameras with synchronized sound recording have enabled news and documentaries to achieve actuality and realism through flexible location work. With recent improvements in videotape technology, television newscasts are more visually exciting and lively because the development of the media is always dependent on the

development of its technology. The arrival of satellites links in the 1960's and the jet liners laid the whole world open to television. New opportunities open up to the reporters as they search for better pictures to accompany their reports.

Hyde (1987:327) writes that field reporters working with ENG operators have the opportunity of planning their coverage, engaging in on-site investigations if they are not satisfied with the first report, thinking through and writing their opening and closing stand ups. They can also record a second, third or as many takes as possible. Pictures and live reporting using ENG machines have made television far better able to take viewers to all parts of the world and wherever the news is breaking. The print medium may wait to tell their readers what has happened in their next edition but the television medium is showing and telling the viewers exactly what is happening now and with vivid pictures! Indeed ENG brings the people to the news events.

Hyde (1987:336) tells that most television news operations make use of one or more remote vans equipped with ENG equipment. These vans are at times used for covering and taping a report in the field but their chief purpose is to enable reporters to cover and transmit their stories directly to the station, often during a newscast. The ENG technology has three important technical features: helical scanning, portability and ease in editing. A typical ENG reporting team includes:

i) The reporter who is responsible for the facts and the words used in reporting the story
ii) The videographer who is responsible for recording the video and sound elements of the story
iii) The technicians in the van who are responsible for controlling the equipment and the microwave or satellite transmission.

BENEFITS OF ENG

ENG confers three basic benefits to broadcast news reporting. These are:

i) Speed: The technology grants speed to news reporting as the videotapes and digital discs from the ENG machines are available and ready for editing immediately after they are recorded. All the reporter has to do is to remove the tape from the machine.
ii) Editing flexibility: The technology allows for the quick construction of a basic news story. Audio and visual effects can be added for emphasis. Some models of the basic equipment have editing units attached to them. This means that the reporter can edit his stories right there at the locations even before reaching the studio.
iii) Mobility: The use of helicopters, microwave and satellite news gathering equipment have made it possible to reach further and faster to any part of the world to cover present happenings. This therefore adds depth and breadth to news coverage as well as goes live from the scene of a story.

COMMUNICATION AND TECHNOLOGY

The ability to communicate effectively depends on the available technology. Ruben (1987:200-202) chronicles the history of information technology.

- About 2000 BC: Early humans first drew symbols on the walls of their caves. The way they beat their drums and the kind of smoke coming out

from their caves communicated different messages among them. These very primitive communication devices laid the foundation of our present day ultra modem information gathering and processing technologies. The development of writing dramatically increased the possibilities of coding data in permanent and portable forms.

- About 1000 BC: Early pictographic writing gave way to alphabets. Paper was invented around 100 AD. The oldest known printed piece is a Sutra printed in Korea in 750 AD. Modem printing began in Germany in the mid 15th century even though the Chinese, Japanese and Koreans developed printing much earlier.
- The 1500s: By 1500, Johann Gutenberg had completed the printing of a Bible using movable type and a printing process that he had developed. Printing revolutionalized the communication process and increased the rate of production of written and visual documents. Meanwhile, communication technologies were developing. The ancient Greeks built many high walls even into their countryside. Different messages were relayed to the people by fire and smoke signals. The Persians and Romans developed a postal system. Official correspondence was conveyed by horse back between stations on a regular basis. The 1500s and 1600s witnessed the impact of printing as newspapers started appearing in their present day form.
- The 1600s: Regular mail service was established to link major cities in Europe.
- The 1700s: Postal services operated in many countries. The telegraph made its advent in 1794.
- The 1800s: Samuel Morse invented the Morse Code in 1837. It allowed the translating of characters into a sequence of long and short electrical impulses (called dots and dashes) that can be sent to a recipient. In 1866 cable was laid across the Atlantic to heighten the rapid transfer of information. The telephone came in 1876 when Alexander Graham Bell discovered that human voice could be converted directly into electrical energy and this in turn could be transmitted over a wire. In 1895, Marconi discovered the wireless telegraph or radio transmission. This sent human voice on air. These marked the introduction of electronic communication technology.
- From the 1930s: Television transmission came in the 1930s. Computer came in the 1940s. The 1950s and 1960s saw the development of communication satellites, which served the same relay function as the early but less sophisticated fire towers of ancient Greece. The use of satellites made it possible to cover the whole world and relay immediately from location. Direct broadcast satellites deliver television signals from the satellites to the homes. The satellite dishes collect faint microwave signals from an orbiting satellite and amplify these about a million times. Microwave technology allows stations not using standard AM, FM and television frequency to transmit at higher frequencies. The higher the frequency, the further the electronic microwave travels in a line of sight. Recent years have witnessed the emergence of miniaturized transistor radios, stereophonic audio equipment and mini cameras; wireless telephones, digital telephone networks, helicopter

borne homing antennae and the compact disks.

- From the 1980s: Computers and telecommunications found new applications in mass media communication. Computerized graphics came into existence and changed factual television. Lightweight electronic cameras-like beta cam and camcorder-means that the television crew do not have to lug heavy equipment to series of events. The introduction of domestic video recorders means that any person with the equipment could time shift: this is record whatever is of interest to him off the air and watch it later.

Therefore the development of new technology changes the way we receive and pass across messages. This means that the available technology also determines how we consume mass communication products. Today teleconferencing or video communication aims to reduce traveling costs by connecting people with video links. Post and Anderson (2000:236) note that large companies have built teleconferencing rooms linked to other similar centers in other parts of the world. They can also view documents. All communication requires a transmission medium. Signals can be carried by a variety of media: electricity, fiber optics or waves. Signals sent through electricity pass through coaxial wires, example as used in cable television. Fiber optic cables are reflective glass or plastic coatings. They offer the fastest transmission rates with the least interference.

Wave transmission includes radio, microwave or infrared. They do not require cables. The airwaves carry the signals. This is known as broadcasting. Any person with a receiver or antennae can pick up the signals. Both microwave and infrared transmission require clear line of vision.

Electronic publishing is the on line publishing or the electronic delivery of newspapers, magazines, news, books and other information via internet. E-publishing was initially aimed at supporting research through the provision of on line bibliography and databases. The coming of the web made e-publishing a most economical and quick way of disseminating information on a mass scale to viewers world wide. Post and Anderson (2000:226-228) write that the internet provides on line archive; new medium approach (of creating new materials for the web, real time news delivery and customized information delivery); edutainment and news on demand.

Communication technology has made journalism a most dynamic profession. It has provided television with new and fascinating tools with which to gather and report the news. Broadcasting is now both contemporary and future relevant. By using these tools wisely and skillfully, a television news reporter is able to gather, process and deliver the news far better than before. The present technology dictates that broadcasting news reporters use them to keep check on themselves as well as answer and re-answer questions bothering on social values.

TELEVISION NEWS WORK

The news process begins when a reporter watches an event or an occurrence of news value. News must be observed, understood and interpreted by the reporter before he can prepare the initial report for the public. Because the reporter may not be at the scene of the event he has to rely on the claims of eye witnesses to get a report of what happened. Reporters try to minimize bias by

collaborating stories from different sources. However, this does not guarantee absolute accuracy or objectivity. DeFleur and Dennis (1994:387) are of the opinion that reality is the ultimate source of all news and that news are the variety of issues, events, conflicts, trends and other happenings in the environment. The television news work includes:

i) field reporting
ii) interviewing of news sources and witnesses to get information from them
iii) video graphic recording of the event or the news maker on film
iv) editing
v) writing the news script to hold everything together
vi) producing the news package by bringing everything together in an orderly manner so that the words match the pictures
vii) anchoring or getting one, two or more newscasters to read the news for members of the audience to listen to.

The production of the television news is team work. The reporter must work well with the videographer. The videographer must be responsive to the editor's role and the editor must understand both videography and news writing. The news script writer must match his words with the available pictures and sounds. The news producer has the responsibility of welding the different reports and accompanying pictures into a unified whole. The anchor or newscaster must deliver the news stories with purpose and conviction. Those who manage the systems and equipment must provide the tools, environment and standard for broadcasting.

In a typical broadcasting newsroom, the tie that binds the news gatherers and the news processors together is the tie of shared professional values in the process of getting the news on air and on time too. Bromley (1994:5) observes that the path followed by the story that makes it to the news bulletin is essentially linear: from the news reporter, to the news managers, news processors and back through the manager to station executives for final approval. At every point is a dialogue with what Dominick (2000:332) calls the gate keepers. This dialogue is whether to include or exclude that particular story. If it is so included, should there be any amendment or should it be left as it is. Indeed news scripts in broadcasting are checked and double checked for errors. The reporter is the first gate keeper and editorial responsibility starts with him. Others on the chain include the news producer, bulletin editor, the news editor and eventually the director of news/current affairs and CEO. The words published by the Manchester Guardian (May 6, 1926) aptly describe the work of a television news station: "its primary office is the gathering of news. At the peril of its own soul, it must see that the supply is not tainted. Neither in what it gives, nor in what it does not give, nor in the manner of presentation must the unclouded face of truth suffer wrong."

In the area of news and current affairs, part of the television news reporters' work is to break a story. Breaking news are topical stories such as the president resigning, the River Niger Bridge being bombed and collapsing. Shingler and Wieringa (1998:96) point out that television relies predominantly on vision to do this. What is therefore selected and scheduled as part of the news program will depend on the availability of pictures. Pictures are got by recording face-face interviews, from filmed scenes, still frames and from the archives. Television news program are

not as frequent as radio news broadcasts. Indeed, most stations run major news bulletin once a day. NTA has its News at Nine. AIT has its own at 8.00 pm. It is difficult to interrupt other television programs to broadcast breaking news, except news of extreme importance. Often teletext is used to pass across the messages. Channels Television, Lagos, uses teletext to pass across breaking news. It is important to note that the audience is more enlightened about and critical of the news simply because their media literacy level is rising; while the station owners who are not dependent on government subvention are driven by commerce and the profit motive.

McLeish (1994) warns that editing should not be used to alter the sense of what has been said or to place the material within an unintended context. Shingler and Wieringa (1998:97) observe that it is common knowledge that there is a fine line between presenting a story exactly as it is developing and re-packaging it for broadcast. This is so because editing is subjective and is determined by the producer's agenda, the time available to turn in the work, airtime, ideology, gender and budget. Only few materials are broadcast without some form of editorial intervention. Shingler and Wieringa (p.97) list other reasons for editing to include the removal of intrusive background noise, tone down a stutter, remove lengthy hesitation, meet time constraints, to match file vision with audio copy, to fit into the news selection and order of presentation, to remove flawed, superfluous or uninteresting material and to create an impact or particular atmosphere by the use of SFX, music speech etc.

CHALLENGES

i) Skill required in live reporting: With live reporting you report events as they are happening. This means that you are precluded from script writing, editing and re-shooting. Cremer, Keirstead and Yoakam (1996:234) are of the opinion that news is usually fast moving, spontaneous and chaotic. Spot news is unpredictable. In the bid to stay on top of the news and in a highly competitive field, reporters can make mistakes. A defamatory statement cannot be withdrawn neither can wrongs turn into rights. Where the reporter is unable to adlib an unfolding news event in an accurate and effective manner, using ENG becomes a challenge. Where the reporter is an inexperienced journalist with a poor background in diverse fields, he may not be properly informed or at most be very poor in live reporting. A reporter who cannot concentrate under pressure and at times under confusion may be unable to speak smoothly, coherently and in an organized manner. A poor journalist may be unable to make sound judgment of an event's news potential, identify the most important points or organize the information into a format that the public can easily comprehend. The reporter may be distracted by on lookers, run into kooks (persons that show up everywhere always with something to say), or sources purposefully giving out wrong information. He may even be in danger especially where he has taped some incriminating materials that may embarrass or land some people in jail.

ii) Cost: It is very costly to produce television news using ENG. The ENG equipment includes portable recorders, tape minicams, microwave transmission and at times a satellite up link and an

ENG van. The machines are expensive to buy and maintain. Television coverage is far more expensive to produce than radio or newspaper news reports.

iii) Technical complications: Technical complications may frustrate the best effort of a field reporter to report from a live location. Where communication with the news anchor is by satellite, a delay of one and one- half seconds occurs between the time the anchor speaks and the time the reporter hears his voice. Similarly, the reporter may hear his own voice a second and half after he has spoken. Sound engineers may minus out the reporter's voice by technical adjustments so that the anchor and the viewers do not experience this lag, but the field reporter is still left with the distraction of hearing his own words on delay.

iv) Misleading facts: Where facts are not properly investigated and reported, chaos may erupt in the society especially in an ethnically volatile country like Nigeria. A Chinese proverb says that a picture saves a thousand words. But in television news reporting the wrong picture can destroy a thousand lives and leave some houses burnt!

v) Time pressure and facts gathering: There is never enough time to prepare fully before going on air. The reporter faces time pressure in gathering the basic facts of the story as quickly as possible. He may gather who, what, when and where, but how and why may not be easily determined, at times, for some days after the news events. But he must not speculate. Sources too may mistake or misunderstand facts. This means that errors have entered into the news story.

vi) Deception: The reach and speed of ENG can be used to lie, mislead and deceive others. Skillful editing can remove flaws or tell totally misleading stories. Spliced pictures can be presented as whole pictures. Pictures can be made to lie. Lies mislead and may cause societal disharmony. During the late Abacha's inglorious reign, the video clips of the alleged coup plotters planning sessions were shown to some traditional rulers. These clips implicated some key officers in a phantom coup. Some people later claimed that these video clips were an assemblage and careful editing of footage from the archives. Also during this dictator's reign, the NT A aired video footage of millions of Nigerians begging the man to continue to rule! NT A apologized to Nigerians after his death because the pictures were used to deceive.

After the Chernobyl nuclear accident, American television networks bought video tapes apparently showing the destroyed Ukrainian plant. However, the pictures were actually those of another nuclear plant in Italy.

Today there is a device known as the electronic darkroom. It can be manipulated to tell lies. This technology makes it possible to create authentic looking pictures of a couple embracing each other even though the man has not met the woman before!

IMPACT

Electronic news gathering has made the following impact in our world:

i) ENG is the foundation of a new information based society: People depend on the news they hear and watch to make some decisions. People are information hungry. Television news uses ENG

technology to fulfill these needs and bring information to the audience. Therefore, the ability of individuals or organizations to acquire, organize, manipulate and transmit information has increased and made the society to thrive or live on information. The information society depends on the provision of relevant information to survive.

ii) **Increase in organizational efficiency:** Business and organizations improve their efficiencies by providing their customers with better goods and services at affordable prices. These organizations are employers of labour and also are tax payers. ENG therefore helps Nigeria to realize some of her long term economic development goals. As long as these companies are in existence, they help to sustain the economic growth of the country. It is not uncommon for viewers to see Nigerians talking of what they want or of industrialists talking of what they can produce. These pools spread demand and supply. Flexible business organizations cue into these to develop new products. The market acceptance of these products leads to the improved profitability of these companies. Their total production adds to the GDP. Nigerians can now choose the products they want and thus induce competition among companies. Because companies are competing with each other, they are forced to improve on the quality of their products, reduce prices of their goods and become good corporate citizens. Benjamin and Blunt (1992) define information technology as the means of acquiring, organizing, sorting, manipulating and transmitting information. ENG is the electronic system of gathering, sorting, transmitting news and information.

iii) **Influence on national development:** National development is the complex relationship between the economic, social and political spheres of the nation and is usually associated with abundance and prosperity. What is shown as the news can therefore affect national development. National development is linked with the economic, social and political information shared among the citizens of Nigeria and even with the citizens of other countries. Decisions are based on the quality of information available to the listener who may be a policy maker, a home maker, employer, employee, trader etc. Therefore television news affects national development. In other words the growing impact of ENG is perceived on economic and political objectives for the citizens to follow so as to socialize to realize national goals. Knowledge

and information are the basic ingredients for any person who wants to respond to opportunities and challenges in our socio economic terrains.

iv) **Improves personal lives:** Enighe and Echu (2004:3) define information as the source of the knowledge and intelligence that individuals or groups need to make the right decisions. Television news communicate a lot of useful information that a knowledgeable viewer can make use of. Wise viewers use the knowledge to store, apply and share information gathered from the television news to improve on their personal, political, social and economic lives. Television news provides information and impart knowledge. Thus the citizens are enabled to tap into new ideas, innovations and technology. These in turn lead to the proliferation of new knowledge and the consequent creation of new wealth and more opportunities for the citizens.

v) **National peace:** ENG Improves our understanding of ourselves. Communicating means making common.. Part of the regular television news package is the making common of our different cultural heritage-no matter how diverse they are- through the transmission of our cultural values to other members of the society. The more common others of different cultural backgrounds see the other cultures of the other ethnic groups, the more likely are they to come to understand them. The more this understanding grows, the more national peace is enshrined. Thus ethnic rivalry and clashes are held in check.

vi) **Professionalism:** ENG has helped to build professionalism into reporting. Reporters have developed professional habits of being mentally alert, prepared and flexible for the thorough coverage of even spot news at the shortest or even no notice at all! Cremer at al (p.234) is of the opinion that the goal of the reporters is to stay on top of the news by being the first to report it in a highly competitive field and getting the news right.

vii) **International scene:** ENG has helped in the wide spreading of ideas and participation of Nigerians in the global economy. Countries that have the most developed technologies are also countries that have the most buoyant economies and advancement. Nigerians are tapping into the world economy and actively participating because the technology of ENG brings into their homes rapid, diverse ideas. These ideas create a wide field of opportunities. Thus ENG bridges the intellectual and economic differences of Nigerians with that of the outside world.

viii) **Cost reduction:** ENG provides for the rapid dissemination of

news and ideas relatively cheaply and efficiently across geographical and economic barriers. A single reporter can get the pictures required of an important news source or even interview him. This is then transmitted around the world even by stations which ordinarily would neither have had access to such a personality nor afford the cost of sending their own personnel to do the job.

ix) **Job creation:** The purchasing, installation and maintenance of the ENG equipment and crew have led to the creation of new jobs. Highly skilled personnel are needed and employed. Some migrate from other regions into the towns with television stations. Indirectly, they help to boost the economic growth and development of these areas. On the other hand, employee migration increases urban congestion and its attendant chaos.

x) **Station Management:** ENG has had a broad impact on broadcast station management by causing changes in station organization and operations. New tasks and skill requirements have evolved that mix information technology and broadcasting together in the news gathering process. Reporters now learn the new skills of operating basic ENG equipment. New tasks have created new job definitions and responsibilities. Today we have ENG coordinators, systems managers and satellite programmers working in harmony with broadcast news reporters. Moving out of the news and the control rooms to the field where the news is being made and recorded has further brought members of these different fields together and built up the team spirit. Even taking the entire newscast on the road involves other station personnel like promotions, administration, marketing, programming and engineering. These personnel may have never had any direct contact with the news gathering process.

xi) **Government operations:** ENG has helped to ensure greater transparency in public and private operations. Government officials and business men with dubious intentions are now wary and more transparent in the running of their offices and in the conduct of their businesses because they do not know whether some troublesome and nosey journalists are hiding somewhere recording or filming their actions and holding them accountable! Thus ENG is a powerful tool against corruption and also deters malfeasance. Thus the citizens are emboldened to ask the government questions on revenue and expenditure. ENG has therefore helped to improve

business practices and the running of government. Because ENG also helps to report the government side, it has helped to win greater public trust. On the negative side, deviant groups, criminals, militant groups and even demonstrators wait to stage their protests when there are television cameras to record what they are doing. Because of the publicity they have attracted other similar groups spring up to make spurious demands. Such groups like the Egbesun Boys in the Niger Delta area, the Bakassi Boys in Anambra and Abia States and the Odua People's Congress (OPC) in Lagos would have quietly faded away into oblivion if the television cameras have not been recording their exploits, kidnappings, killings and destruction of goods and disrupting of services of both the government and the citizens.

xii) **Politics:** ENG and news reporting have implications on politics and politicking. However, Bojuwade (1991:7) observes that most media content are not explicit but overflow with implicit messages about social order and political activities. To him therefore news is not an event but a report of an event. He adds that information carried by the media leads to formation of significant political attitudes and emotions. Media personnel assign meanings to stories by putting those stories into perspective, interpreting them and even indicating the values to be used in judging the stories. Bojuwade is of the opinion that television does this most because it appears to be the most potent medium for stirring emotions and creating politically relevant mental images.

CONCLUSION

The introduction of ENG brought both benefits and problems in news reporting. ENG took television news reporting to another level: the level of live coverage. However immediate or live coverage is completely unedited. This leaves the probability of inaccuracies or lies being told on air! Similarly, live reports may violate professional conduct or ethical procedures and ignore good taste as the reporter's immediate task is to be the first on the air with the report. However the Nigerian television industry has not fully taken advantage of the wonders of ENG, probably due to financial constraints. But the on going revolution in communication technology, stiff competition and the global outlook would definitely force them to acquire and use these new technologies.

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